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Piecing together the ‘workplace multilingualism’ jigsaw puzzle

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1 Why multilingualism in the workplace, and why now?

Once upon a time people used to associate multilingualism in the workplace with two typical scenarios: large multinational corporations where geographically mobile, urban-oriented, highly skilled and elite professionals and managerial staff worked across national boundaries and operated in and out of different languages, or some seedy sweat factory where socially insecure, often uneducated, low-paid ‘immigrants’ struggled to make a living in their home languages and/or the language of the host country. The meaning of multilingualism to the people involved in the two scenarios could not be more different! Nowadays, however, multilingualism permeates every section of society and impacts on our everyday life in an unprecedented way, for better or worse. It is common in the workplace, a space where people not only work in roles defined in their contracts, but also come into contact with others of different interests and different status such as employee, manager, work contact, customer, visitor, etc.

Yet multilingualism in the workplace is different from multilingualism at home or in other domains of social life. It has more direct, yet entangled, economic and social implications and serves interactional purposes which can be at any point on the continuum of goal-orientation and relationship-building. Multilingualism in the workplace is both a policy issue for managers and those in positions of power to control the workplace, and an interactional issue for the individuals working in the specific context. These features of multilingualism in the workplace have indeed made research in this area not only practically relevant, but also theoretically significant and challenging at the same time.

This special double issue, edited by Jo Angouri, is a timely, concerted effort to investigate some of the key issues related to multilingualism in the workplace in a fashion that reminds me of piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. Most of the studies presented here focus on how different participants in the workplace, with their diverse roles and backgrounds, manage multilingualism in interactions. In what follows, I shall highlight some key messages, or clues, from the articles in this special issue, that help us in identifying patterns and finding solutions in the workplace multilingualism jigsaw, before discussing what I see as future directions for the research in this area.

2 Multifaceted reality of multilingualism in the workplace

What emerges through the collection of the eight studies presented in this special issue is a nuanced account of the multifaceted reality of multilingualism in the workplace which varies across space, jobs, roles, sites, interactional activities and languages. These variations not only demonstrate the multiplicity of factors, but also reveal the extent to which these factors interplay in shaping workplace multilingualism.

2.1 Multilingualism across space

Multilingualism in the workplace is common in many different parts of the world and has evolved into its current state for different reasons. Among the 8 articles in the special issue, each frames their research within a geographical area or areas. These areas include Australia, where there is a large immigrant population (Piller & Lising), some European countries where multilingualism has been a long-standing tradition due to their social-economic ties with neighbouring countries such as Denmark (Hultgren; Lønsmann; Gunnarsson), Sweden (Nelson; Jansson; Gunnarsson; Angouri & Miglbauer) and some European countries where multilingualism is a relatively 'new' reality such as Greece, Croatia, Italy, Serbia and the UK (Mahili; Angouri & Miglbauer).

The choice of language(s) of communication in the workplace in different geographical spaces is contingent to some extent on the mutual intelligibility of languages. As Gunnarsson's review of multilingualism in European workplaces suggests, speakers of Danish, Swedish and Norwegian could use their respective mother tongues in meetings because of the similarities between these lan-

guages. However, when meeting with Finns, the Scandinavians often turn to English as a *lingua franca*, due to low mutual intelligibility between Finnish and the Scandinavian languages.

2.2 Multilingualism across jobs, roles and sites

This special issue highlights the need to examine multilingualism in the workplace closely in relation to participants' jobs and roles and their working environment. We see a stark contrast between those meat-processing workers from the Philippines who operate along a conveyer-belt in a small town in Australia, boning and slicing at a speed which leaves no scope for talk (Piller & Lising) and those immigrant care workers in a Swedish care home whose tasks require them to develop empathy with and to achieve compliance from an elderly Kurdish resident suffering from dementia (Jansson).

The fact that language demands and requirements vary for immigrants in different jobs and roles is well demonstrated in the KINSA-project carried out at Uppsala University, Sweden, reported in Gunnarsson's article. It was found that in a hospital in Sweden, both doctors and nurses of immigrant background use Swedish predominantly in their work to communicate with patients and relatives. Other languages are also used in the workplace for different purposes: the doctors reported the use of English for their research and publications, while some of the nurses use their mother tongue to mediate between doctors and patients. In another workplace, a Swedish company, a clear divide exists between engineers and factory floor workers from immigrant backgrounds. One third of the engineers reported the predominant use of Swedish, one third English and the rest both Swedish and English to the same extent. However, for factory workers, Swedish was reported to be the main working language. Most of them did not use either their mother tongues or English in the workplace.

Among the dichotomies which I found useful in contrasting different language demands and requirements between roles and jobs are 'front-stage' vs. 'backstage' (Angouri's introduction). Originating from Goffman's work (1959), the former refers to the types of jobs and roles that resemble performance on stage and involve communication with an 'audience' such as customers, clients, external partners and the general public, while the latter has more to do with communicating within the organisation or the team. Another dichotomy is 'official' and 'unofficial' duties (such as socialising) as proposed in Mahili's model. She uses this to show that each post comes with both official and unofficial duties and that language choice depends on 'duties' as well as post and professional expertise. Her argument is very useful in considering the overall communication needs of workers in the workplace.

2.3 Multilingualism across interactional activities

Recent research on the role and features of interactional activities in the workplace has been very fruitful in demonstrating how ‘doing collegiality’ (a term used by Holmes 2000) is part and parcel of ‘getting the job done’. Several articles in this special issue (e.g. Nelson; Jansson) seek to demonstrate how, in a multilingual workplace, people make use of multilingual resources and/or interactional activities to build rapport with co-workers or clients and to achieve their communicative goals while doing their work. These findings, in particular, the discussion on multilingual creativity, lend support to Angouri & Miglbauer’s argument (this issue) which states that it is problematic to view multilinguals as proficient speakers of a number of distinct languages, a view gaining increasing support in current research on multilingualism, in particular, the notion of translanguaging, a notion to which I will return in a later section.

2.4 Multilingualism across languages

Although the ‘multi’ part of multilingualism in the workplace implies the use of multiple languages as desirable, *which* language(s) and *to which extent* the languages available are represented and supported by *whom* and *why* have been of core concern for researchers in multilingualism in the workplace. Languages are not equal in terms of socio-politico-economic value. Evidence for ‘selective multilingualism’ (Phillipson 2003, cited in Angouri & Miglbauer), in which some languages were given prominence rather than others, even when the languages concerned were claimed to be in parallel use, was reported in several articles in the special issue. In her article, Hultgren discusses the Parallellingualism (parallel language use) model implemented in Danish higher education. Although the model is ‘overtly’ intended as a guiding principle for managing multilingualism in Danish universities and to ensure an ‘equitable balance’ between English and the Nordic language(s), Hultgren, through analysis of policy documents, discovered the hidden agenda behind the model: for the government, the model was to set off the challenge posed by rapid expansion of English programmes and therefore meant ‘more Danish’; in contrast, for universities, the model was turned around as a strategy of internalisation and therefore meant ‘more English’. One model, two opposite, hidden, agendas.

Language choice has become a complicated matter due to language ideologies (see Angouri’s introduction for a definition of this term), affected by the following factors:

- There is a pecking order of languages or a linguistic hierarchy in the perceptions of multilingual speakers. 'Standard' or 'normative' language ideology is common, with native varieties of English placed at the top of a language hierarchy and regarded as 'correct', 'good', 'proper' and 'supreme', as argued in Lønsmann's article.
- Related to the issue of pecking order, some languages are perceived to be more 'useful' than others, as evident in the dominant political and public discourse. These include 'multilingualism as a skill', 'English as the language of internationalisation', 'English as key to success', etc. The commodification of language is well discussed in Heller (2010), flagged up in Angouri's introduction and further expanded in Angouri & Miglbauer's article.
- 'Language expertise' is bundled up with 'professional expertise' (Mahili). Having the 'right' linguistic resources and skills helps to construct professional expertise and becomes an important marker of expertise itself.

3 Different models of multilingualism

Multilingualism in the workplace varies across space, jobs, roles, sites, interactional activities and languages and is sensitive to language ideologies and political, social and economic and local factors. It is not a surprise that different models of multilingualism exist. Compared with models that have a strong 'designed' and 'controlled' flavour, some models emerge as a 'natural and organic facilitator of communication' at the grass roots level (Hill & van Zyl 2002: 33). Elsewhere, Hewitt (2010) provides several more models of multilingualism that have evolved in different workplaces. One is his own study of Polish, Chinese and Kurdish companies in London (2008). Within these predominantly minority language companies, communication with partners and clients is carried out through bilingual agents placed at strategically important 'nodes'.

4 Multilingualism as a research site: where are the frontiers?

Research methodology and the research agenda are mutually informative. Research on multilingualism in the workplace has benefited and will continue

to benefit from the ethnography framework, which provides a platform to link data from multiple sources including observation, interaction and narrative data from interviews, and to weave researchers' interpretation with participants' voices. As illustrated in several articles in this collection, the ethnography framework has proved very effective in tracing the everyday reality of multilinguals in the workplace and in discovering tension and controversies.

To understand the language choices made by multilinguals in the context of multiple factors and models of multilingualism, studies with a comparative dimension in which one group of 'actors' or 'stakeholders' are compared with another have proved to be helpful in differentiating less prominent factors from the more significant ones. For example, the study reported in Gunnarsson's article on the communicative situation of immigrants in Sweden compares immigrant doctors, nurses and cleaners in hospitals with immigrant engineers and factory floor workers in manufacturing companies, and demonstrates that posts, roles and the needs of the workplace influence the modes of communication more than the general status of the immigrant. Similarly, the contrast between 'international' and 'local' employees in Lönsmann's article helps to illustrate what linguistic exclusion means to different people and what its costs are.

Many studies started with a particular segment of a workplace or group of multilinguals and sought to identify issues and tensions in practices among the multilinguals concerned. An opposite approach would be what I would call '*backtracking*', in which researchers start with examples of success or failure and go back to find out what has worked or failed. It would help to address some of the 'why' questions.

5 Thoughts on future directions

The articles presented in this the special issue complement each other in their accounts of and approaches to workplace multilingualism and offer us insights into its dynamics. How do we move forward from here?

5.1 What is a workplace?

Studies on multilingualism in the workplace need to consider the fact that a workplace is not only a physical space where people work, but also a social space where people meet, interact and build relationships. Employees are expected to get the job done and 'do collegiality'. The interweaving nature of

both goal-oriented and social aspects of a workplace makes research on the workplace theoretically challenging, not least because we need to ask questions such as, 'What is the workplace in contemporary society?' 'How is it different from other sites of social relationships and social interaction, say home, school, or travel?' We also need to think about how we generalise research findings based on a case study of a factory, company, hospital, bank or shop.

Currently, there are three lines of enquiry which I believe are useful in foregrounding workplace features and which complement the existing literature in piecing together the multilingual workplace jigsaw puzzle. One is the *economics of the multilingual workplace*, in which economic effects of multilingual language use are stripped bare and examined in relation to economic performance (e.g. Grin, Sfreddo & Vaillancourt 2010). It quantifies and estimates the costs and benefits of multilingualism and provides economic motivations for policy holders and stakeholders.

Another line of investigation is *multilingualism and social exclusion* (for a review, see Piller 2010). Language is a double-edged sword. It can be inclusive and exclusive at the same time. Knowing the right language can establish rapport with other employees, facilitate career progression, open doors to the job market, and increase mobility. But people who do not know the language (e.g. 'English-have-nots', a term proposed by Preisler 2003, cited in Lønsmann), or who do not have 'adequate' or 'desired' proficiency in a language, can find themselves linguistically territorialised, socially excluded and financially penalised (see Schutter 2003 for a critique on linguistic territoriality principle). This line of enquiry helps us to understand the social and emotional impact of multilingualism on its actors.

Related to this line of investigation is *intercultural communication studies*, an area of study which is interested in understanding how people negotiate intercultural differences perceived or made relevant to interactions (Zhu Hua 2014). Many of the analytical notions and research findings there are relevant to the understanding of interpersonal relationships between multilinguals. For example, the notion of *interculturality* can help to unpack how participants make (aspects of) cultural identities relevant or irrelevant to interaction through multilingual resources (e.g. Zhu Hua 2014; Dervin & Risager 2014). The debate over the role of culture and its both normative and emerging nature in interaction is conducive to the understanding of how national, organisational, professional and local cultures intersect within contact zones (e.g. Roberts 2011; Holliday 2013).

5.2 What counts as ‘multi’ in multilingualism?

Through this special issue and other previous work in the area, it is clear that multilingual practices vary across space, jobs, roles, sites, interactional activities and languages. Here, I see the potential in linking up with two key analytical terms which have been researched in other related disciplines and fields.

The first is the notion of *translanguaging*. I discussed earlier the view that multilingual users should not be considered as speakers of multiple, discrete languages. The notion of translanguaging, which was initially developed in language teaching, has now become an important analytical term to capture the dynamic and flexible multilingual practices amongst multilinguals who are capable of going between and beyond linguistic systems and structures and bringing together different dimensions of linguistic, cognitive and social skills, knowledge and experience of their different social worlds (see Li Wei 2011; García & Li Wei 2014, for a more detailed discussion of the notion of translanguaging).

The second is the notion of ‘English as a lingua franca’ (or ELF), advocated by recent studies on lingua franca interactions where all or some participants interact with each other in a common language of choice other than their native languages (e.g. Jenkins 2009; Seidlhofer 2002; Mauranen 2006). This line of enquiry has moved away from the paradigm of regarding ‘non-native speakers as being inherently problematic’ and treats lingua franca as a language in its own right. It has proved particularly fruitful in understanding how speakers with different ‘linguacultural’ backgrounds work together in interactions to achieve communicative goals. It will be interesting to see how the ideological stance taken up by ELF studies can be expanded to the study of workplace multilingualism, which is entangled with ideologies of multilingual employees, employers and government policy makers.

Watch this space.

Bionote

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